

Patient Centered Care... The Conversation Starts Here



**QUALITY,
COMPASSIONATE
CARE**

**EVERY VETERAN
EVERY DAY**

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HALL OF HEREOS

The Tomah VA Medical Center honors America's heroes each day and Hall of Heroes inductions are just one of the many ways we recognize our amazing Veterans. The Tomah Hall of Heroes program spotlights the exceptional accomplishments of Veteran patients who receive, or have received, care within the Tomah VAMC main campus location or any of its four community-based outpatient clinics in Clark County (Owen), La Crosse, Wausau, or Wisconsin Rapids.



Criteria for induction include two paths of heroic service accomplishment. One for Veterans who have been decorated with a military award and citation for heroism or valor, and another for recognition of demonstrated heroic activity within the community. Specific details and the nomination form (<https://www.tomah.va.gov/docs/Documents/TomahVAMCHallofHeroesNominationPackage.pdf>) are available on the Tomah VAMC home page.

Each hero inductee is honored with a framed photograph and information about their personal heroic accomplishments in the military and within the community. You can visit the Hall of Heroes in the tramway between building 400 and building 401. The Hall of Heroes serves as a continuing tribute to Veterans who have truly gone above and beyond.

**For more information, please contact the Public Affairs Officer
at 608-372-7759.**



I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on January 12, 1949. I was the first of my parents three children, my sister and brother followed me. Growing up I always dreamed of becoming a Marine. This was probably because I had an uncle and a cousin that were Marines in World War II. My cousin was on Iwo Jima and survived but did suffer from PTSD.

I attended Saint Anne's Catholic grade school and Washington High School, both in Milwaukee. When I was 17, I wanted to drop out of high school and enlist in the Marine Corps on the buddy plan with two of my best friends who happened to be brothers. They both enlisted in January 1966. My father, who was a World War II Veteran that served under General Patton and had received a Purple Heart, refused to sign for me and told me that I needed to finish high school first. He said if he signed for me and I had come home in a box, he would blame himself. He told me that when I finished high school and if I still wanted to enlist, he would give me his full support.

In December of 1966, two things happened: first, I met the girl who would become my wife and second, I got a letter from one of my best friends that had enlisted in the Marines. He was in the hospital in Vietnam and had been wounded in a fire fight. He was lucky to be alive. He told me how screwed up things were in Vietnam and advised me not to enlist and to avoid it if possible. On my 18th birthday the Marine Corps recruiter called to wish me a happy birthday. He said I suppose I'll see you tomorrow but was disappointed when I told him it wasn't going to happen and why. I said I'll see him when I get drafted.

I graduated from high school in January of 1967. I got a job working at a company my uncle worked at. I started out in the shipping room loading semi-trailers. I was married in 1968 and we had our first son in March of 1969. I started attending night classes at college in the fall of 1968, while continuing to work my day job. I dropped out of college in the fall of 1969. That October I received my draft notice to report for induction into the Armed Forces in November.

I called up the Marine Corps recruiter and signed up for a two-year enlistment in the Marine Corps. I volunteered for First Force Recon, but because of my math skills they placed me in artillery as Fire Directional Control/Forward Observer. I trained on the 105 and on the 155 Howitzer. My orders came through to join a 155 Howitzer Battery in Vietnam. Before I was able to finish preparing to go, the battery I was to join was pulled out of Vietnam and sent to Fort Sill, OK. I finished my enlistment with the 155 Battery I was with at Camp Pendleton.

After my discharge, I returned to Milwaukee, WI. I went back to the job I had before I enlisted. My wife and I had our second son in 1971. In April of 1978, we left Milwaukee and moved to Buffalo County in southwest Wisconsin. We ran a small business and farmed. I've worked at a warehouse, a cheese plant, hauled fuel, worked for a cable company in sales and sold real estate. My wife and I divorced in March of 1984.

From 1984 until 1999 I sold radio advertising. In 1997, I went returned to college at Winona State University. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Mass Communications. In 1999, I went to work for the US Army Corps of Engineers on the Mississippi River. While with the Corps of Engineers, I worked on the Dredge Thompson, as a deckhand on locks and dams and as a head Lock and Dam Operator and Maintenance & Report as a Sand Blaster. I did an emergency deployment for Hurricane Katrina and Isaac. In 2009, I deployed for flood duty for the Red River of the North flood. I served as Union President of AFGE Local 1441 from 2007 until 2015. I retired from the Corps of Engineers at the age of 64 in January of 2013. After retirement, I remained as Union President until July of 2015.

In 2007, I met my second wife and we were married in 2009. We are still together to this day. Together we have four sons, two daughters, 10 grandsons, four granddaughters, two sons-in-law and four daughters-in-law. Our children and grandchildren are all doing well, which is something that I am grateful for.

Community Service has been a big part of my life. In 2017, I became a mentor for the La Crosse area Veterans Mentoring Program. I help other Veterans that are affected by issues such as PTSD, TBI, addiction, and other problems. As a mentor, I can help other Veterans get the help they need to readjust to civilian life. It has been very rewarding.

I participate in the Million Veterans Research Program and recently started participating in the All of Us Veterans Program. Both programs monitor Veterans physical and mental health in an attempt to better understand what can be done to help Veterans. My hobbies are hunting, fishing, working out and going to my grandchildren's school programs and athletic events. I have been a scout master, little league coach, have been on the Board of Directors of the March of Dimes, and worked on various committees for the Chamber of Commerce. I have also been involved as a volunteer for numerous sportsman's clubs.

I am a lifetime member of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV). I am also a member of AMVETS and have held numerous offices including Post Commander and Minnesota State Commander.

Being a Marine gave me the skills I needed to survive anywhere under any circumstances. It has also taught me to never sell myself short and to never give up. I am truly proud to claim the title of United States Marine. It is never given, always earned. I am affected from PTSD and survivor's guilt. Another thing has affected me over the years is the way I was treated by anti-war demonstrators; being called a baby killer and being spit on. I think that many Veterans that served during that era are and were affected by the treatment they received from these demonstrators. I have been treated good though by the VA and have been getting my healthcare from them since 1999. I wouldn't go anywhere else and the VA has given me the care that I need.

Looking back on my life, I can truly say I wouldn't have done anything differently. I have no regrets. I have had a good life and I am grateful for that. One thing I know for sure, I would become a Marine all over again. Semper Fi!

What's Your Story?

To participate in the My Life, My Story Program, please contact us below:

Email: vhatommystory@va.gov

If you are a caregiver of a Veteran, or are a Veteran who is a caregiver, we are here to support you. We are here for you, whatever you are feeling right now. We can help you learn about resources available to you. We also want you to know that we can help you with aid specifically designed for you as a caregiver. Our sole purpose is to help you.



The Program of General Caregiver Support Services (PGCSS) provides:

- Access to education and training
- Courses at local VA Medical Centers
- Weekly support services

The Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC):

- Provides resources, education, support, financial stipend, as well as, health insurance and beneficiary travel (if eligible)

Who can apply for PCAFC?:

- Eligible Veterans must have sustained or aggravated a serious injury (now includes serious illness) in the line of duty on or before May 7, 1975 or on or after September 11, 2001
- Veterans must meet both of the following conditions:
 - Have a service-connected disability rating by the VA of 70% or more.
 - Need personal care services for minimum of six continuous months. This need is based on the Veteran's inability to perform an activity of daily living. Needs can include supervision, protection, or instruction.

For more information please visit:

<https://www.tomah.va.gov/services/caregiver/index.asp>

or call: 1-800-872-8662, ext. 64441

Unsure if you want or need a COVID-19 vaccine?

The Tomah VA Medical Center is here to help you with your questions and concerns about the COVID-19 vaccines. Our goal is to provide every Veteran with a vaccine who wants one, and to provide information to those who are unsure.

We want you to have all the information at your fingertips, so you can make the best decision for you. Many Veterans have concerns about the speed at which the vaccine was developed, the new Delta COVID-19 variant, side effects of the vaccines, and more. If you have similar concerns or questions, please reach out to your Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT). We look forward to listening to your questions and concerns, and ensuring we address them.

The Tomah VA Medical Center is still offering the Moderna and Janssen (Johnson and Johnson) COVID-19 vaccines.

The main campus in Tomah is currently providing this vaccine on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Clark County Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) is administering this vaccine on Thursdays.

La Crosse, Wisconsin Rapids, and the Wausau CBOCs are offering this vaccine on Fridays.

Walk in appointments are welcome, but we encourage Veterans, Veteran Spouses, and those eligible under the SAVE LIVES Act to call 608-372-3971, ext. 66274 Monday through Friday 8:30am to 4:00pm to schedule an appointment ahead of time to ensure there is vaccine available for you.



Tomah VA Medical Center
Fiscal Year 2021
October 1, 2020 - June 30, 2021

V-Signals is a customer experience tool used to analyze real-time feedback from Veterans who have a valid email address.

Through V-Signals, the Tomah VA Medical Center can see what we are doing well in and where we have opportunities for improvement. Surveys are sent for the following outpatient services:

- ⇒ Scheduling an Appointment
- ⇒ Healthcare Visit
- ⇒ Pharmacy (In-Person)
- ⇒ Pharmacy (Mail)
- ⇒ Labs/Imaging



Below are the scores for the Tomah VA Medical Center for:

Ease/Simplicity: 90.9%

Employee Helpfulness: 97.6%

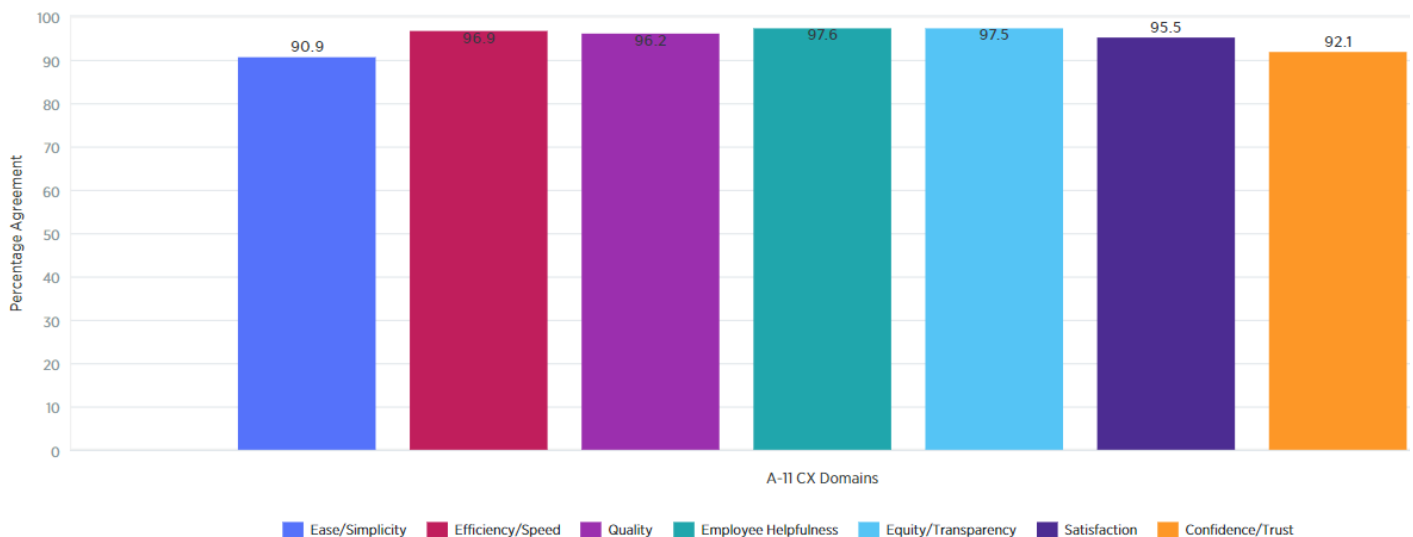
Efficiency/Speed: 96.9%

Equity/Transparency: 97.5%

Quality: 96.2%

Satisfaction: 95.5%

Confidence/Trust: 92.1%



Veterans Serving Veterans



My military life in the Air Force is probably much different from what many servicemembers experienced. You see, I served 23 years as a military radio and television broadcaster. Ever heard of AFN? Yep, that was my job. Working around military installations to cover news events as varied as full-scale military training exercises to school field trips to interviews with visiting celebrities. Not at all the type of job most servicemembers think of as truly being part of the military.

Despite the fact that I only truly deployed once to a combat location (Afghanistan), my training was more focused on serving warfighters, their support units, families, and the military community. What I loved most about my job was the chance to learn something new almost every single day. Talking with people from many backgrounds who gave everything they had to protect our nation. Letting them know that what they do matters. In some cases, they made huge sacrifices. Separation from family and friends. Exposing themselves to dangerous and unpredictable outcomes during both intense training and intense combat. Some made the ultimate sacrifice. Others wear sacrifice on their war-torn bodies.

Yet for many troops, there remained a sense of pride and joy. The feeling of Esprit de Corps with their fellow soldiers. Great joy upon completing significant accomplishments. And the shedding of tears during emotional homecomings when they finally get to reunite with their families and friends after long absences.

When I retired from the Air Force, I went to work for one nonprofit educational organization and one state university. At times, there were glimpses of my military past, but in general we all went to work and returned home again. Day after day. As a Veteran, I often felt like an outcast. It was a long drive to connect with any military location and the servicemembers who live there, so the great things I experienced in the military started fading away.

Fast forward 13 years, and I recently found an opportunity to re-join fellow Veterans and the military members assigned nearby. In February 2021, I started working here at the Tomah VA Medical Center. It had always been a goal of mine to give back to the military and veteran communities and now I was able to fulfill that goal.

My work is in public affairs, but like my job as a military broadcaster I get the chance to meet new people and experience new things on a nearly daily basis. Sharing “war stories” with Veterans, talking about the many places we all have served and visited around the world, and that unspoken connection among everyone who has ever worn a uniform in service to our nation. This is more than a place to work. It’s a community of caring and a place I’m proud to call home.



Scott Gomer, Public Affairs Officer

Veterans Serving Veterans

My family's history with the military was fairly limited. One of my great grandfathers was an Army officer in the WWII European theater, another gave his life as an enlisted infantry Marine in the Pacific. The only direct stories I ever heard were from my grandpa who served on a Navy destroyer during Vietnam.

As my high school years were coming to an end, I wanted some adventure. I wanted life experience. I wanted to be part of a team. I wasn't interested in college and at the time I had hopes of becoming a State Trooper. A recruiter from every service came to my high school lunchroom one day and I was probably the easiest sell ever. The Marine recruiter told me I could join as military police, build skills that I could take with me toward that Trooper idea if I left the military, MPs deploy as convoy security, and what better team could I join than the few and the proud? My papers were signed that week in 2005 to join the Minneapolis Marine Reserve unit out of Fort Snelling.



I deployed to Camp Lemonier, Djibouti in 2008 as base security. While there, my unit did a good deal of humanitarian missions. We went to very poor villages, bringing them construction materials and helped build new shelters and repair old ones. We taught English to children and then got whipped by them in a game of soccer. It was all very fulfilling. In 2011 I deployed again to the Helmand Province of Afghanistan as convoy security and quick reaction force.

Soon after returning from Afghanistan I discharged from the Marines as a Sergeant and was hired here at the Tomah VA as a police officer. After a few years of being an officer, I decided I wanted to work towards direct clinical care and began using the G.I. Bill ultimately receiving a degree in psychology and not long after I moved to my current position as a data analyst in the Mental Health Service Line. I hope to continue on in my education, when the time is right, to be able to directly provide mental health care to my fellow Veterans.

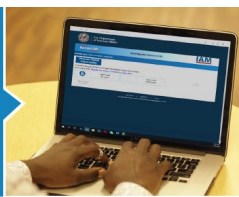
In hindsight, I joined the Marines for some short-sighted reasons, but I know now that the military set my life up for success. I couldn't be more thankful for the experience and the tools my enlistment gave me.



Devin Brom

Mental Health Program Analyst

FILING VA TRAVEL CLAIMS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



WHAT IS VA TRAVEL CLAIM REIMBURSEMENT?

VA travel pay reimbursement through the Beneficiary Travel program pays eligible Veterans back for mileage and other travel expenses to and from approved health care appointments.

AM I ELIGIBLE FOR TRAVEL PAY?

VA offers two types of travel pay reimbursement: general health care travel and special mode transportation. As a Veteran, you may be eligible for one or both. A Veteran may be eligible for beneficiary travel services if the following criteria are met:

- Have a service-connected (SC) rating of 30 percent or more, or
- Are traveling for treatment of a SC condition, or
- Receive a VA pension, or your income does not exceed the maximum annual VA pension rate, or
- Are traveling for a scheduled compensation or pension, or if not otherwise eligible as noted above, and
- Have a vision impairment, spinal cord injury or disorder, or a double or multiple amputation who's travel in connection with care provided through a VA special disabilities rehabilitation program (including programs provided by spinal cord injury centers, blind rehabilitation centers and prosthetics rehabilitation centers) if such care is provided on an in-patient basis or during a period in which you are provided with temporary lodging at a facility of the Department to make such care more accessible.

WHAT'S THE FASTEST WAY TO SUBMIT A NEW CLAIM AND GET FASTER PROCESSING OF A PENDING CLAIM?

For new claims and any pending claims, log in to Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS) and create a profile. An updated profile is required now to file a claim online and to process previously submitted kiosk and hard copy claims. Visit AccessVA and select the Veteran Travel Claim Entry icon to get started.

<https://access.va.gov>.

HOW DO I SUBMIT A TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT CLAIM FOR GENERAL HEALTH CARE TRAVEL USING BTSSS?

VA is phasing in a new web-based portal to submit and process beneficiary travel claims at select locations. The portal, BTSSS, is VA's preferred method to accept travel reimbursement claims. Once implemented, claims submitted using the kiosks will be phased out. However, hard-copy submissions will still be available. Check with your Beneficiary Travel Office to find out when the BTSSS is available at your facility. To submit a claim, visit <https://access.va.gov>, select the Veteran Travel Claim Entry icon, and logon using a DS Log on Level 2 account. Log in to BTSSS and create your profile today to allow faster processing of any pending claims.

WHAT IS A DS LOG ON LEVEL 2 ACCOUNT?

A DS Logon is an ID issued by Department of Defense (DoD) that allows Veterans and caregivers to access many VA and DoD sites with one user username and password. A DS Log on Level 2 account is required to file a travel claim using BTSSS.

WHY SHOULD I USE BTSSS?

BTSSS automates the claims process to ensure timely processing and payment of travel reimbursement claims. With BTSSS, turnaround time to evaluate and settle a claim is generally less than 5 days. BTSSS allows Veterans and caregivers to submit claims 24/7, 365 days a year from a computer or mobile device. It also allows users to electronically track the status of a claim request.

CAN I GET HELP TO FILE MY FIRST CLAIM?

There are several sources of help to file a claim. Eligible Veterans and caregivers may get help from a travel clerk [at the facility or refer to the BTSSS user's guide at https://www.va.gov/health-care/get-reimbursed-for-travel-pay](https://www.va.gov/health-care/get-reimbursed-for-travel-pay).

Beneficiary Travel Help Desk for Veterans and caregivers:

1-855-574-7292

Compassionate Contact Corp

Tomah VA Volunteers are currently matched up with 16 Veterans! We'd like your help to continue to grow this program. This assignment, just like all volunteer assignments has benefits for both the Veteran and the Volunteer. If you know a Veteran who could benefit from this program, let us know! If you are a volunteer who is interested in joining this virtual program, please let us know.

THE PROGRAM

- Visit a Veteran over the phone, tablet, or computer
- A "friendly visit" with NO medical or home-care duties
- Matches trained volunteers with Veterans for 1:1 socialization
- Generally 1-2 times per week for 15-60 minutes
- Schedule is based on need and availability

THE VOLUNTEER

Our Volunteers are people who are compassionate, kind, idealistic, and selfless.

Volunteers provide compassion, companionship, and support for both the Veteran and the Caregiver.

Who is able to volunteer?

- Veterans - You are able to use your unique background and experience to help other Veterans overcome their challenges.
- Non-Veterans - You will experience satisfaction in developing new friendships and learning from "living history."



Volunteers must be over age 18, attend orientation, successfully pass a background check, and be trained for specific duties.



Benefits to Volunteer:

- Opportunity to build 1:1 connection with one of our nation's heroes
- Develop empathy & active listening skills
- Flexibility - Program is virtual and can be done anywhere with hours based on your schedule

THE VETERAN

You are living history, and we have volunteers that would like to hear your stories and have regular, friendly visits with you. Even if you live with others and have a support system, you may enjoy the benefits of having a friendly volunteer call you.

Volunteer visitors provide quality 1:1 social interaction, engaging the Veteran in meaningful conversations. Regular telephone visits are known to **enhance well-being and quality of life!**

Benefits to Veteran:

- Additional socialization
- Combat loneliness or boredom
- Opportunity to share your stories with a new audience

**To Learn more, call
Voluntary Services at
608-372-1727**



CONNECTING TO OTHERS IS GOOD MEDICINE

Over the past year, we've practiced social distancing to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities. For some of us, that has been a big change from being around people. But for others, social isolation is nothing new.

Many Veterans know the loneliness that comes with social isolation all too well. Maybe it's from living in a remote area, not having friends and family nearby or losing loved ones. Perhaps transportation is a challenge. It could be there's no internet or cell service available. Or, maybe it's because illness or disability make it hard to get out and about. Veterans can experience isolation for many reasons, and the pandemic made it worse.

Social isolation and loneliness come with more than an emotional cost. They are just as harmful to our health as obesity, smoking or lack of physical activity. They're linked to health problems like depression, poor sleep, cognitive decline, and poor immunity. Social isolation and loneliness can be risk factors for suicide. That's why the VA's Suicide Prevention program is working to reduce Veteran isolation and increase connections.

How can you combat isolation and loneliness?

- **Turn off technology.** Watching TV, playing video games or surfing the internet might make you feel occupied, but it can actually make loneliness worse. If you want to go online, do something interactive – like take an online class, attend a support group, visit a chat room, or have a video call with a friend.
- **Be spontaneous in reaching out.** Sometimes we get into traps of thinking we can only call someone if there's time for a long conversation. A simple "I just wanted to let you know I'm thinking about you today" can go a long way in helping you feel that person's presence. That five-minute call can do wonders for both of you.
- **Strike up a conversation.** Do you get out of the house, but still feel lonely? Greet people you pass on the street, the cashier at the grocery store or the person at the next gas pump. Everyday conversations, just chit-chat, help us feel we're connected.
- **Join others in activities.** Take a class to learn something new. Attend a virtual church service or Veterans' club meeting. Volunteer your skills or abilities (even from home).
- **Get a pet.** If you have the means to care for an animal, consider adopting one from a shelter. If not, perhaps your local humane society needs volunteers to spend time with homeless animals.
- **Use your hands to make something.** Can't get out and do the physical work you used to? Try a new hobby like drawing, cooking, or woodworking. Being creative helps you feel productive because you have something to show for your time. Feeling productive is a natural antidote for loneliness.

- **Use envelopes and stamps.** In these days of impersonal emails and texts, everyone appreciates a handwritten note, card, or letter. Your recipient will appreciate it, and you'll feel more connected in the process.
- **Practice self-care, compassion, and forgiveness.** When you find yourself thinking about being lonely, don't stay in those thoughts. Be kind to yourself. You can get unstuck by recognizing you are loved just because you are you, and you are not alone.
- **Ask for help.** If the loneliness becomes too hard to bear, reach out. Tell someone honestly how you feel. Call a friend, neighbor, family member or someone from a faith community. If you are in crisis, call the Veterans Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255**. Staff are available 24/7/365.

Do you care about someone who might be lonely or depressed?

You don't have to live alone to be lonely. In the past year, family members have lost connections. Kids who haven't been to school have missed their classmates. Workplace changes have cut us off from coworkers. Elders and those at high risk have been restricted from having visitors. You may suspect that someone very close to you is lonely. But during times of stress, conversations can be hard, and you might miss warning signs that a loved one is depressed, anxious, or in crisis.

If you want to help, you need to find out how that person feels. You don't need to be a therapist to do it. The question "How are you" is hard to answer and doesn't always sound genuine, so trying these approaches might make it easier for the person to open up:

"How are you holding up" or "How are you coping?"

"What's been on your mind lately?"

"How has your week been so far?"

"Are you feeling anxious or down about anything?"

"Is there any way I can support you right now?"

"What is something I could do that would help you?"

Remember that if someone brings up a concern, it may be because they just need someone to listen ... not give advice or solutions. If he or she does ask for your help and you can give it, be sure you thank them for opening up and trusting you.

If the person doesn't open up, keep reaching out with a "soft touch." Let them know you're there by sending encouraging messages, inspirational quotes, or meaningful photos. That way, they'll know you're available to listen and give support.

When needed, recommend help from a professional. Ask if anything will make it hard for the person to follow through (i.e. child care, transportation, etc.), and then lend a hand problem-solving.

If you believe someone is in crisis, call 911 or call the Veterans Crisis Line at **1-800-273-8255**.

Tomah VA Medical Center

500 E. Veterans St.
Tomah, WI 54660
Phone: 1-800-872-8662
608-372-3971
<https://www.tomah.va.gov/>

La Crosse VA Clinic

4000 State Rd. 16
La Crosse, WI 54601
Phone: 608-784-3886
Clinic Hours: Monday – Friday
7:30am – 4:30pm

Wausau Clinic

515 South 32nd Ave.
Wausau, WI 54460
Phone: 715-842-2834
Clinic Hours:
Monday- Friday
8:00am – 4:30pm

Clark County Clinic

8 Johnson St.
Owen, WI 54660
Phone: 715-229-4701
Clinic Hours: Monday-Friday
8:00am – 4:30pm

Wisconsin Rapids Clinic

700 Hale St.
Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54495
Phone: 715-424-4682
Clinic Hours: Monday-Friday
8:00am – 4:30pm



Choose VA

The Tomah VA welcomes your feedback. If you have suggestions for future newsletter articles, Please email or call our Patient Centered Care Coordinator at

Vhatomvoiceofvet@va.gov

Or

608-399-8829

Tomah VAMC Campus Map



Tomah VA Medical Center Vision:

Tomah VAMC will excel in patient-centered Primary, Whole Health, Mental Health, Rehabilitative and Long-term healthcare, partnering with other VHA and community organizations providing a fully integrated continuum of care. As a servant led institution, we will develop a culture of excellence as a High Reliability Organization responsive to the changing needs of Veterans. Initiatives will be shaped by technology, research and evidenced based practices. Care will be delivered by engaged collaborative teams in an integrated environment that supports learning, continuous and sustained improvement. We will embrace change and constantly reinvent our organization to meet the changing needs of the Veteran, healthcare, and national direction.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Tomah VA Medical Center